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ABSTRACT

Noting that communication apprehension (CA) is a pattern of anxiety that can profoundly affect oral communication, social skills, and self-esteem, this digest examines some causes and consequences of CA and ways in which it can be diminished. Following an introduction, the digest defines CA and some of its characteristics. Next, the digest looks at the causes of CA, which include low social self-esteem and ethnic/cultural divergence in communication norms, and then briefly discusses the emotional, educational, and social consequences of CA. Finally, the digest proposes ways that CA can be prevented or reduced, including a supportive classroom environment and a developmental sequence of oral activities, and teacher training in understanding the communication behaviors of students with CA. Twelve references are included. (HTH)

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Communication Apprehension: The Quiet Student in Your Classroom

Communication apprehension is far more than the stage fright frequently found in speech classrooms, school assemblies, and drama productions. It is a pattern of anxiety, established often in the elementary grades, which can profoundly affect much or all of a student's oral communication, social skills, and self-esteem. This digest examines some causes and consequences of communication apprehension and ways in which it can be diminished.

What Is Communication Apprehension?

Communication apprehension (CA) has been defined as an "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey 1977). This anxiety is a significant problem at the elementary school level. Research reveals that at least 11 percent of the elementary students experience severe CA, and an additional 20 percent may experience enough anxiety to warrant some sort of intervention (Harris 1980; Garrison and Garrison 1979; Wheeless 1971).

Communication anxiety can be situational rather than pervasive in a child's behavior. "A tendency to be anxious when communicating may be specific to only a few settings (e.g., public speaking) or may exist in most everyday communication situations, or may even be part of a general anxiety trait that arises in many facets of an individual's life" (Friedman 1980). Much research has dealt with CA in terms of a personality trait, but more recently the idea of CA has expanded to include both trait and situation views (McCroskey 1977).

What Causes Communication Apprehension?

General personality traits such as quietness, shyness, and reticence frequently precipitate CA. According to Friedman (1980), when the ability and desire to participate in discussion are present but the process of verbalizing is inhibited, shyness or reticence is occurring. The degree of shyness, or range of situations that it affects, varies greatly from individual to individual.

Seven factors which could result in a quiet child have been identified (McCroskey 1980; Bond 1984):

1. low intellectual skills
2. speech skill deficiencies
3. voluntary social introversion
4. social alienation
5. communication anxiety
6. low social self-esteem
7. ethnic/cultural divergence in communication norms

While CA is but one of these factors, the others can lead to CA. At the same time, their presence should not necessarily be interpreted as CA.

Another widely accepted explanation for CA is the Negative Cognitive Appraisal Model (Glaser 1981). The model assumes that the quiet child was criticized for his or her early language performance. As a result, the child learned to expect negative reactions and subsequently learned to avoid them by keeping quiet. Even if teachers, parents, or other children merely *appear* to be reacting negatively to such a child's talk, the child will perform poorly and avoid oral communication situations (Bond 1984).

What Are the Consequences of Communication Apprehension?

The consequences of CA are emotional, educational, and social. Shyness and reticence affect the social skills necessary for children to make friends. Shy students tend to confine their career aspirations to vocations that require little oral communication. They seem to have a higher need to avoid failure, and they have less achievement or success motivation than other students.

In the classroom, the teacher may regard quiet students as "perfect" in that they are not discipline problems. But often the CA students' lack of response or participation has a negative, spiraling affect—they are perceived as less capable, and are thus called on less frequently in class discussion. Their lack of enthusiasm tends to limit teachers' attention to them, which further reinforces their own low self-evaluation (Richmond 1984; Friedman 1980).

How Can CA Be Prevented or Reduced?

The school environment can play a vital role in the prevention of communication apprehension. For example, thirty elementary and secondary teachers focused attention on the prevention of reticence, and identified several characteristics of a healthy classroom. These included

- creating a warm, easygoing climate in the classroom
- helping students get to know one another at the beginning of the year
- using drama and role-playing situations
- having students speak to the class in groups or panels rather than individually
- allowing students to work with classmates with whom they feel most comfortable

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- having students speak from their seats rather than from the front of the room
- presenting students with oral activities in a developmental sequence (Friedman 1980)

Writing more specifically about the common "stage fright" type of CA, Suid (1984) suggests activities to overcome anxiety and improve presentation skills. These include informally questioning students concerning topics about which they are knowledgeable, reading speech transcripts and listening to master speakers, playing charades, presenting speeches without eye contact, and illustrating a speech.

To address the problem of CA on a somewhat broader level, Bond (1984) proposes a four-phase strategy:

1. require teachers in training to take more than an introductory course in oral communication (e.g., a course aimed at understanding the communication behaviors of students)
2. create basic communication courses in the earlier elementary grades
3. provide specialized treatment for quiet/shy students on a voluntary basis
4. develop classroom activities that encourage oral communication

The most commonly used treatment for CA in adults has been "systematic desensitization." This includes training in deep muscle relaxation, construction of anxiety-creating stimuli, and the graduated pairing, through imagery, of these anxiety stimuli with the relaxed state (Friedrich and Goss 1984). Variations of these methods may also be effective for younger students.

Preventing or alleviating communication apprehension for every student is a monumental if not impossible task. But simply recognizing that CA is a frequent phenomenon that often occurs early in students' lives can be a spur toward eliminating many factors that contribute to the quiet child's withdrawal from communication.

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